

## **Virus spreads to new animals ; West Nile kills dog, 3 squirrels**

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### **Abstract:**

*Dominic Travis, veterinary epidemiologist at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, said he has been testing sick and dead animals there, but as of Tuesday none had the West Nile virus. He said he also has been testing other animals, such as lions, for presence of the disease to develop a baseline of infection among the animals.*

### **Full Text:**

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Illinois researchers documented the first known cases in the country of a dog, a wolf and three gray squirrels dying from the mosquito-borne West Nile virus, but officials emphasize that the disease remains rare and is unlikely to spread from animal to human.

The College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign announced the cases Tuesday, saying that an 8-year-old Irish setter-golden retriever mix from the Bloomington-Normal area died of the virus.

"This dog had a condition of the brain showing nervous symptoms," said John Andrews, director of the university's veterinary diagnostic laboratory. "In that situation it could be a number of possibilities, including rabies, distemper or encephalitis of other types. We eliminated all of those other possibilities and said, 'Well, what about West Nile?'"

"The tests came up positive."

West Nile virus is mainly a disease of birds. Mosquitoes that bite the birds can transmit the disease to humans and other mammals through subsequent bites.

Horses and humans are the mammals best known to become sick or die of the disease. Hundreds of horses have died across the state so far this year, officials said.

On Tuesday, state health officials announced three more human deaths and 18 new cases, giving Illinois 21 deaths and 399 overall cases--the most in the nation. The disease is rare for humans, with fewer than 1 percent of those infected developing encephalitis.

The Illinois Department of Public Health also announced additional grants worth \$876,582 for mosquito control, including stepped-up spraying for adult mosquitoes. Cook County will receive the majority of that amount, and about \$600,000 is earmarked for the south Cook region, officials said.

The new deaths announced are a 78-year-old woman from Tinley Park, an 88-year-old woman from Melrose Park and a 64-year-old man from Berwyn. State health officials said all three had

underlying medical conditions.

As for the mammals, a handful of other animals have contracted the virus, including a Rocky Mountain goat in Nebraska that died, said Randall Crom, a senior staff veterinarian at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's animal and plant health inspection service in Riverdale, Md.

On the East Coast, there have been reports of squirrels, chipmunks, a rabbit, a skunk and stray cats developing the virus, he said. But because those animals were found dead, it is difficult to prove that West Nile caused the deaths, he said.

As for the Illinois animals, the diagnoses were confirmed by the Department of Public Health and the university-based State Natural History Survey.

The U. of I.'s Andrews said he believes most dogs are resistant to the disease because only one has tested positive, but he warned that elderly dogs or those with compromised immune systems could be at higher risk. He recommended that pet owners keep their animals indoors during early morning or dusk but avoid spraying them with insect repellent or DEET, which could make them sick.

#### Risks related to area

Other scientists agree that pets appear to be safe from West Nile because they have likely been exposed to the virus but not fallen ill in great numbers.

"I think probably the animals' risk would be related to the particular geographic area they're in," said Kathryn Converse, a wildlife disease specialist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Madison, Wis. "Illinois has got so many cases right now, it may be an indication there were more infected mosquitoes present."

Horses are more vulnerable: As of Tuesday, 413 had tested positive statewide, with about half of them dying, said Julie King with the Illinois Department of Agriculture. There is a vaccine for horses, but no treatment for humans or other animals.

Researchers believe more squirrels will test positive, and they plan to begin testing the animals statewide. The university confirmed that three squirrels --two from Chicago and one in Champaign--tested positive for West Nile after showing signs of a neurological disorder.

The infected squirrels appeared to be wobbly and were biting their paws, walking in circles and showing difficulty climbing trees before dying.

"One unusual thing is they do seem to vocalize, to cry out as if in pain," Andrews said.

He said he knows less about the 3-month-old wolf, which died the second day after showing signs of lethargy. The dog, whose immune system wasn't working properly, arrived in the lab the last week of August after a four-day period of illness, Andrews said.

## Testing at zoo

Area veterinarians practicing where the West Nile virus has taken the largest toll on birds and humans said they are interested in the new cases but not too worried about dogs.

"We're talking one case for the United States now," said Andrew Miz, veterinarian at the Animal Medical Center in Skokie. "Until I know more, I won't worry. I think one documented isn't enough."

"My guess is that dogs and cats are susceptible, but it's rare and they are resistant," said Amy Perille, owner of the Berglund Animal Hospital in Evanston. "I do think people are going to have more and more questions."

Dominic Travis, veterinary epidemiologist at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, said he has been testing sick and dead animals there, but as of Tuesday none had the West Nile virus. He said he also has been testing other animals, such as lions, for presence of the disease to develop a baseline of infection among the animals.

"At this point, all of our fears are still under control," he said.

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